



JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2025

Xplor

**FURRY
FORECASTER *or*
MADE-UP MYTH?**

LET'S ASK A WOODCHUCK

CONTENTS

FEATURES

6 Winter Treasure Hunt

A walk through the woods in winter is like following a treasure map.

12 Diary of a Sleepy Groundhog

Groundhogs love three things: eating, digging, and sleeping.

CREATURE FEATURE

10 American Kestrel

Pull out this poster and tape it to your wall to make your room look wild.

Hoo's ready for 2025? Short-eared owls glide gracefully over prairies and pastures, searching for mice and voles to eat. The tufts of feathers that give a shortie its name (they aren't really ears) are visible when the owl is curious or alarmed.

DEPARTMENTS

- 2 Strange but True
- 3 What Is It?
- 3 Two Truths, One Lie
- 4 How To
- 18 Xplor More
- 20 Get Out!
- 21 Go Find It!

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ON THE COVER

Woodchuck

STRANGE BUT TRUE

Your guide to all the
UNUSUAL, UNIQUE,
AND **UNBELIEVABLE**
stuff that goes on in nature

Because its eyes are on the sides of its head, an **EASTERN COTTONTAIL** has a nearly 360-degree field of vision. If it were on a pitcher's mound, it could see every base. But it does have a tiny blind spot: right in front of its twitchy, little nose.



You wouldn't need a scuba tank if you had lungs like a **RIVER OTTER**. To catch fish and crawdads, these air-breathing mammals can hold their breath and stay underwater for up to eight minutes.



In January, **WINTER STONEFLIES** crawl out of streams and trudge around in the cold to find a mate. Snow and ice can't cool off the romance of these love bugs. Chemicals in their bodies keep them from turning into *bugsicles*.



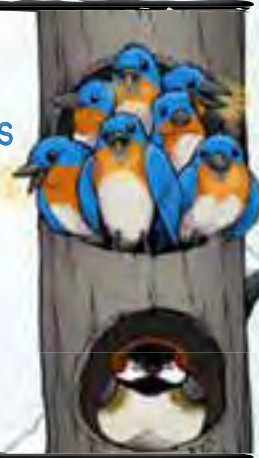
AMERICAN BEAVERS discharge a sweet-smelling brown goo from their backsides. They use the goo to mark the boundaries of their home territories. Humans use it as an ingredient in some artificial vanilla flavorings.



DUCKS have up to 12,000 muscles used to move feathers. A duck may fluff its feathers to trap heat, streamline its feathers to dive underwater, or raise its feathers to look big and strong to attract a mate.



Snuggle buddies and snow *brrrrrrds*: When winter turns shivery, **EASTERN BLUEBIRDS** crowd into cavities and huddle together for warmth. **CHICKADEES**, on the other wing, like to sleep alone, relying on half-inch-thick coats of fluffy feathers to survive.



Super-sized snack attack: Although full-grown **BOBCATS** rarely weigh more than 40 pounds, the ferocious felines have, on rare occasions, been known to take down adult white-tailed deer, which can weigh over 100 pounds.



WHAT IS IT?

DON'T KNOW? Jump to Page 21 to find out.

- 1 My seeds hold quite a surprise.
- 2 Though tiny they grow to king-size.
- 3 They ride on the wind through the skies.
- 4 So my branches can start to arise.



TWO TRUTHS, ONE LIE

Which fascinating fact is actually a fib?



- 1 A wood frog spends winter chilling out — literally. When icy weather hits, the palm-sized amphibian quits breathing, its heart stops, and its body freezes nearly solid.
- 2 In Missouri, these cold-loving frogs prefer to live in our hottest and driest habitats, like rocky, sun-drenched glades in the Ozarks.
- 3 Green algae grows on wood frog eggs. The algae gets carbon dioxide and nutrients from the baby frogs. In return, the baby frogs get oxygen from the algae.

HOW TO

SPOT A BALD EAGLE

Every winter, thousands of bald eagles follow migrating flocks of waterfowl to Missouri. With keen eyes and a pair of binoculars, it's easy to spot America's national symbol in the wild. Here's how.

WHAT TO BRING

- ◆ A pair of binoculars or a spotting scope will bring distant eagles into view.
- ◆ A field guide will help you identify other soaring birds.
- ◆ Winter weather can be cold and windy. Pack a puffy coat so you can stay outside longer.
- ◆ A stocking cap will keep your head toasty, and gloves will keep your fingers warm and nimble — especially when they're gripping binoculars.
- ◆ Snacks and warm cocoa will fuel your body's furnace.

BINOCLAR TIPS

Focusing a pair of binoculars on a soaring eagle can be a challenge for first-timers. Follow these steps, and you'll be a pro in no time.

WHERE TO GO

Bald eagles are like pirates, sailing the skies, eagle-eyed, looking for food to loot. They mostly plunder fish and waterfowl, but they won't turn up their beaks at any meat — even if it's been dead for a bit. To find eagles, go where there's water and food, like big rivers, large lakes, or wetlands. Here are a few hot spots to check out.

- 1 Loess Bluffs National Wildlife Refuge
- 2 Smithville Lake
- 3 Swan Lake National Wildlife Refuge
- 4 Eagle Bluffs Conservation Area
- 5 Lock and Dam 20
- 6 Lock and Dam 24
- 7 Lock and Dam 25
- 8 Riverlands Environmental Demonstration Area
- 9 Old Chain of Rocks Bridge
- 10 Bagnell Dam Access at Lake of the Ozarks
- 11 Truman Reservoir
- 12 Schell-Osage Conservation Area
- 13 Stockton Lake
- 14 Shepherd of the Hills Fish Hatchery
- 15 Mingo National Wildlife Refuge



WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- ◆ Bald eagles aren't bald! If you look closely at one through binoculars, you'll see that its head is covered with crisp white feathers.
- ◆ It takes a young eagle about five years to get the white head and tail of an adult. Until then, a youngster has a brown head and tail with a blotchy brown body and wings. In areas with lots of eagles, you'll likely see both youngsters and adults.
- ◆ A hungry eagle isn't shy about stealing a meal. They've even been known to snatch fish from anglers and ducks from hunters. Watch long enough, and you may see one swipe snacks from another eagle.
- ◆ Male eagles swoop, cartwheel, and somersault through the air to show off for female eagles. If a female likes what she sees, she flies over to hold hands with the male. With their talons locked, the eagles plummet to the ground. Just before they go splat, they let go and swoop back into the sky.
- ◆ Some eagles migrate north in the spring. Others nest in Missouri. If you spot an enormous pile of sticks in a tree, it's a good bet you've found an eagle nest.

- 1 Find the eagle with your bare eyes.
- 2 Without taking your eyes off your feathered friend, raise the binoculars to your eyes. The eagle should appear in the center of the image.
- 3 If you don't see it, lower the binoculars and try again. Remember: Don't look at the binocs, keep your eyes glued to the bird!
- 4 If the eagle looks fuzzy, simply turn the focus knob until the image becomes sharp.

YOUNG EAGLE

WINTER TREASURE HUNT

A walk through the woods in winter is like following a treasure map. You never know what might be hidden for you to discover. So gather your bullwhip, put on your Indiana Jones hat, and let's go on an adventure! How many of these wild "treasures" can you find?

SPY THE YEAR'S FIRST BUTTERFLY



Mourning cloak butterflies spend the depths of winter huddled in tree cavities or hiding under loose bark. On warm winter days they wake up and flutter around looking for tree sap to slurp.

BAG SOME BLOOMS



Ozark witch-hazel is among the first plants to flower in Missouri. Even when there's snow on the ground, look (and sniff) along streams for this woody shrub with yellow, frilly, sweet-smelling flowers.

GET SCOLDED BY A SQUIRREL



Bushy-tailed nut-munchers hate to be interrupted when they're gathering acorns to eat. Listen for a grumpy *cherk-cherk-cherk* if you startle one.

SEE PEPPER JUMP



Tiny, insect-like creatures called snow fleas become active on sunny winter days. To find them, look for pepper-sized specks in the snow at the base of trees. Snow fleas have spring-loaded tails that catapult them into the air when they want to flee.



Eastern fox squirrel



NOTE SOME NESTS

Bare branches make it easier to spot nests that were once hidden by leaves. Look for the cup-shaped nests of songbirds, large, papery nests of bald-faced hornets, and messy leaf piles made by squirrels.



Bald-faced hornet nest

HEAR A HAMMERING HEADBANGER

Woodpeckers talk to each other by drumming. They pick something hollow — like a dead branch — and hammer at it with their beaks. The drumlike rat-a-tat-tapping tells other woodpeckers someone is looking for a mate or claiming a patch of trees as their own.



Red-bellied woodpecker



Turkey tail



Oyster mushroom



Cinnabar polypore

FIND A FUNGUS

Colorful funguses can be found growing on trees (usually dead ones) at any time of the year. Look for multi-colored turkey tail mushrooms, creamy white oyster mushrooms, and reddish-orange cinnabar polypores.

TURN UP A TUNNEL

If you notice a tangle of tunnels in the grass under the snow, you've found the work of a vole. These mouselike rodents with stubby tails snip grass to eat. As they do, they build — mouthful by mouthful — a maze of trails used by a variety of small creatures.



SCRATCH AN ARTIST KONK

If you find an artist conk mushroom growing on a tree, use a stick to scratch its snow-white underside. Like magic, wherever you scratch will turn dark.

WITNESS A RABBIT RUMBLE

In late winter, eastern cottontails show off to attract a mate. They chase and hop over each other. Sometimes they even punch or kick with their paws.



RABBITS: DANITA DELIMONT / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



Cooper's hawk

SPOT A HUNGRY HAWK

Cooper's hawks and sharp-shinned hawks get their dinner by bagging birds. The agile raptors dive-bomb through trees to catch unwary prey by surprise. If you find a pile of feathers, you've probably found the scraps from one of their meals.



Sharp-shinned hawk



MARVEL AT MIGRATION

The airways over Missouri become a highway in the sky in February as thousands of geese migrate north to nest. Listen for the honking *loook* of Canada geese, the noisy, nasal honking of snow geese, and the squeaky, laugh-like yelps of greater white-fronted geese.

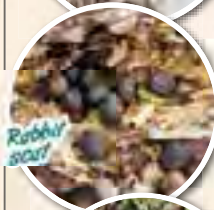


SEARCH FOR SHEDS

When mating season winds down, a buck's antlers become wobbly, like loose teeth. Eventually, they fall off. Search for "sheds" on south-facing hillsides, in crop fields, and along deer trails.



Deer scat



Rabbit scat



Coyote scat

MATCH THE SPECIES TO ITS FECES

Every animal eats. Every animal poops. Biologists call these droppings "scat." Deer leave raisin-shaped pellets. Rabbit pellets are rounder, like chocolate puffs. Coyote scat is usually furry from the animals they eat. And raccoons often leave seeds in their scat.



Striped skunk



Raccoon



White-tailed deer



PERUSE SOME PAWPRINTS

Most of Missouri's mammals come out at night, so they often go unseen. Footprints in fresh snow (or a muddy bank) offer clues to who's been prowling around.



Virginia opossum



Eastern cottontail



WATCH FOR WAXWINGS

Cedar waxwings are named for the waxy red nubs on their wing feathers. In winter, waxwings form noisy flocks to search for cedar berries and other wild fruits to eat. Listen for their breezy, trilling calls to help find a flock.





SPOT A SLEEPY SCREECHER

Look closely inside tree cavities and along branches. You might find an eastern screech-owl taking a nap. The camouflage pattern on its feathers makes the tiny owl all but invisible against a barky background.



HEAR SOME HOOTS

If you stay out until sunset, you might hear a lovestruck owl calling to its mate. Here's how to tell *hoo's* hooting: Great horned owls give a deep *hoo, huh-HOO, hooo, hooo*. Barred owls sound like they're hooting: "Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you all?" And eastern screech-owls give a high-pitched wavering whinny.

FIND A FORAGING FLOCK

In winter, birds band together to search the forest for food. If you hear a foraging flock but can't find it, hiss through your teeth to make a loud *pish-pish-pish* sound. This mimics the alarm call of a wren, and curious birds might fly closer to investigate.



Carolina wren



WELCOME RETURNING ROBINS

Some American robins spend winter in Missouri. Others fly south where there's more food to be found. In early February, watch for flocks of wandering robins returning from their southern vacations.

SPOT A HUNGRY 'MUNK

Some eastern chipmunks sleep through winter. Others nap only during cold spells. And a few stay active all winter long. By mid-February, nearly all chipmunks emerge from their underground dens to search for food.

CALL A COYOTE

Coyotes yip, bark, and howl to tell other coyotes "I'm lonely" or "stay away" or "let's find some rabbits to eat." If you hear coyotes calling, give a loud howl. Who knows? They might howl back.



AMERICAN KESTREL

TINY YET MIGHTY

Bigger than a robin but smaller than a crow, American kestrels are among Missouri's smallest birds of prey.

HOVERING OVERHEAD

Kestrels often flap furiously to hover in place so they can zero in on prey down below.





SUPER SIGHT

Rodents mark their trails with urine. To humans, the pee is invisible. But kestrels can see ultraviolet light, so the urine glows like a neon sign pointing toward dinner.

CAVITY CRITTER

Kestrels nest in cavities but can't hammer out their own holes. Instead, they use abandoned woodpecker nests, hollow trees, and bird boxes.

PREDATOR AND PREY

Kestrels eat insects, rodents, and small songbirds. Due to their small size, larger raptors like hawks and owls prey on kestrels.

DIARY OF A SLEEPY GROUNDHOG



Hi! I'm CHARLOTTE. I'm A WOODCHUCK — AKA A GROUNDHOG — A BIG, CHUBBY SQUIRREL WHO LOVES TO SLEEP, EAT, AND DIG.



GROUNDHOG DAY

FEBRUARY 2 — Can you believe people think groundhogs predict the weather? They say if I see my shadow on Groundhog Day there will be six more weeks of winter. Where do they come up with this stuff? I'm not a furry forecaster! I have dreams of my own you know! In fact, when I'm done ... with this ... nap ... snort ... I'm going to ... snore ... and then ... Zzzzzzzzzzz.

BIG LEAGUE BURROWER

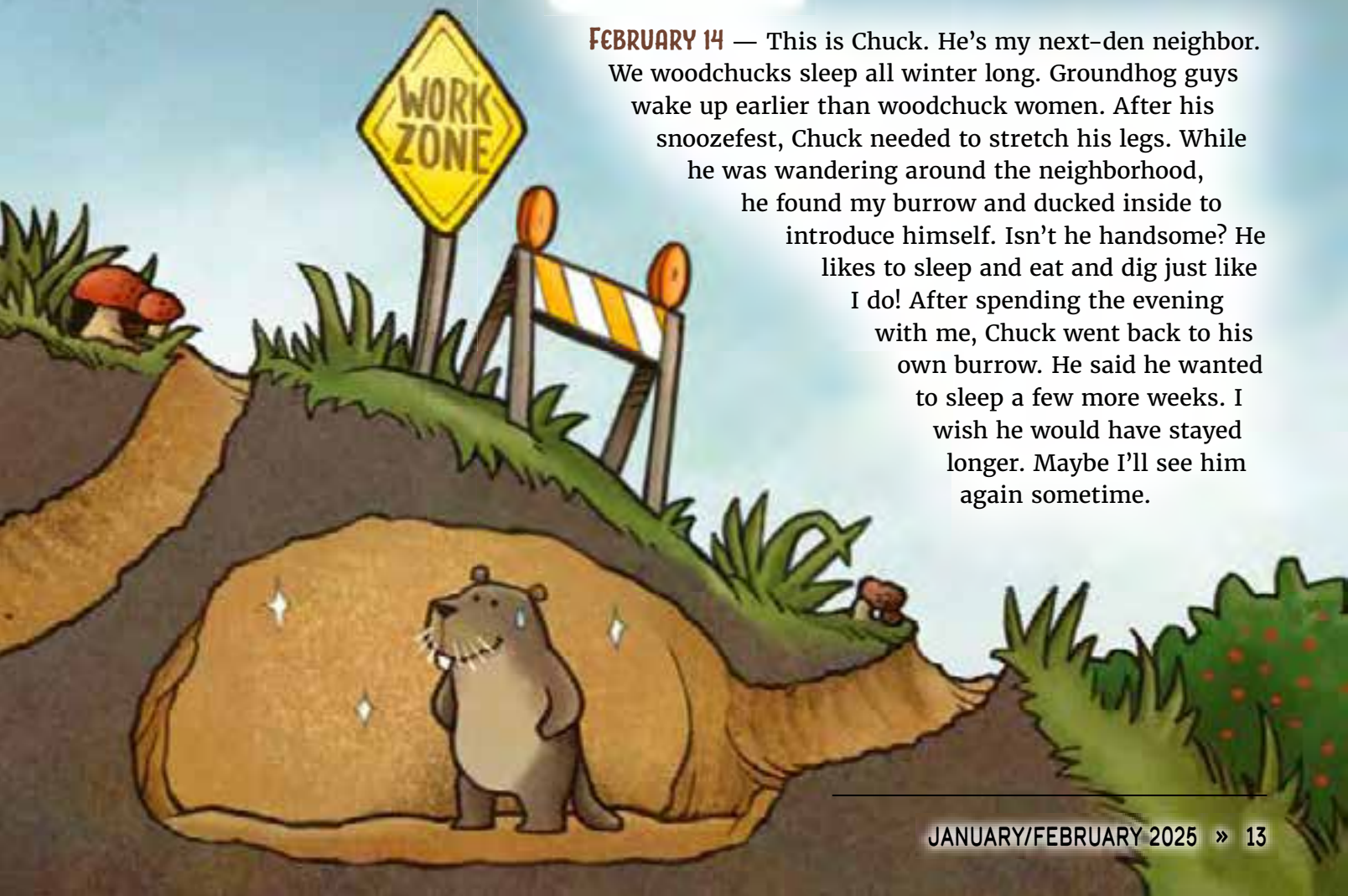
FEBRUARY 24 — I'm better than a bulldozer when it comes to building burrows. Using only my paws and claws, I moved nearly 1,000 pounds of dirt to dig a hole in this hillside. Tree roots? No trouble. I use my teeth to chew through them. I can even close my ears to keep out dirt. Can you close your ears? My bedroom is 6 feet underground, and my hallway to the surface stretches nearly as long as a basketball court. *Whew!* No wonder I sleep so much.





DATE NIGHT

FEBRUARY 14 — This is Chuck. He's my next-den neighbor. We woodchucks sleep all winter long. Groundhog guys wake up earlier than woodchuck women. After his snoozefest, Chuck needed to stretch his legs. While he was wandering around the neighborhood, he found my burrow and ducked inside to introduce himself. Isn't he handsome? He likes to sleep and eat and dig just like I do! After spending the evening with me, Chuck went back to his own burrow. He said he wanted to sleep a few more weeks. I wish he would have stayed longer. Maybe I'll see him again sometime.



SOAKING UP THE SUN

MARCH 2 — All that dirt I dig has to go somewhere. I like to pile it up right outside my front door. On warm days, I love to stretch out on my dirt mound and soak up the sun. I was catching some rays when Chuck stopped by today. Something tells me I'm not his only girlfriend. I'd call him a rat, but that's not entirely true. Woodchucks are rodents, there's no doubt. But we're not rats. We're squirrels — Missouri's largest, in fact.



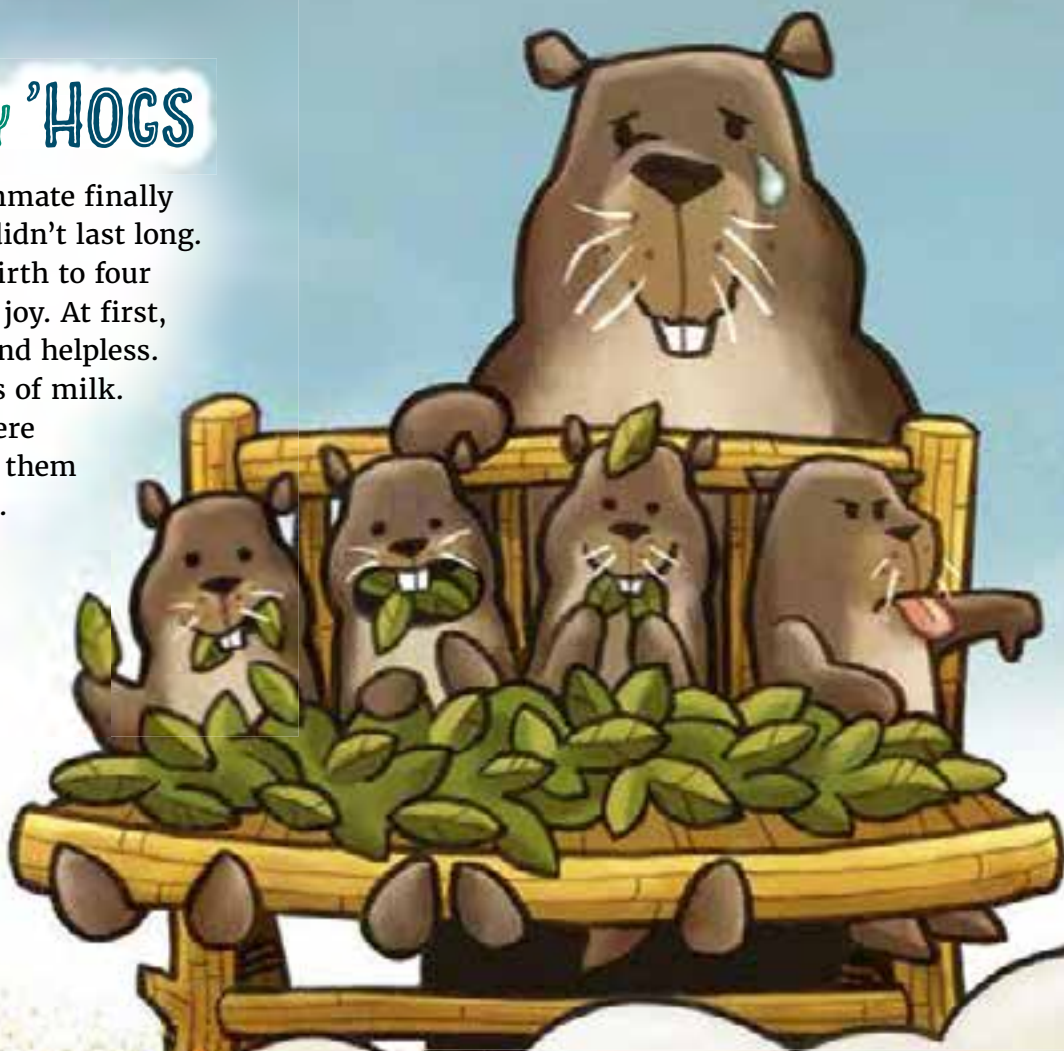
RUDE ROOMMATE

APRIL 5 — Lots of critters use woodchuck burrows. Rabbits, opossums, foxes, coyotes, weasels, raccoons, and badgers all take shelter in groundhog holes. Most are polite enough to wait for the original owner to leave before they move in. But some set up shop while we're still here! I came home a week ago to find a striped skunk asleep in my den. Rude! And how can I put this politely? I'm pretty sure my new roommate doesn't use deodorant. *Pee-eww!*



HUNGRY, HUNGRY 'HOCS

MAY 17 — My stinky roommate finally left! But peace and quiet didn't last long. A few weeks ago, I gave birth to four hamster-sized bundles of joy. At first, my babies were hairless and helpless. So I fed them lots and lots of milk. In about a month, they were furry and fit. Now I bring them tender green plants to eat. They can't get enough. They love 'em. Except for Chuck Junior. He's picky.



WOODCHUCK WRESTLEFEST

JUNE 3 — My kids are driving me nuts! They chase each other around the den, stirring up dust. They wrestle and fight. They growl and squeal. And they always — *always* — want something to eat. I can't find a moment of peace. Luckily, the pups are old enough to follow me out of the den. They have a lot to learn about life on the surface. In a few weeks, they'll strike off on their own.





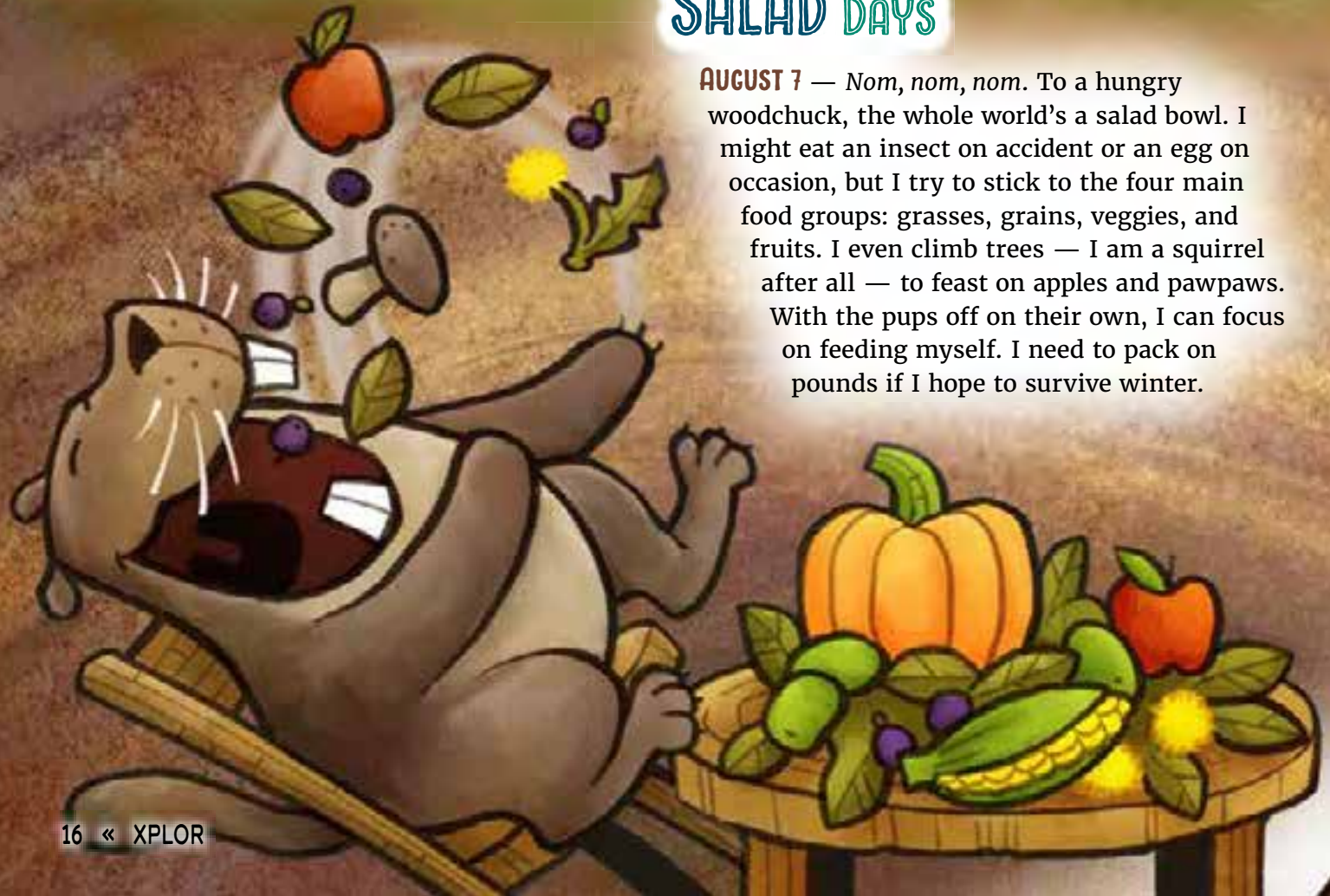
WARNING WHISTLE

JULY 6 — Today the pups and I were out on the meadow, nibbling leaves. All of a sudden, I spotted a shadow sweeping across the grass. Then I heard a hawk's blood-chilling scream. I gave a shrill whistle, and the pups scurried back to the burrow like furry brown streaks. *Whew!* That was close! Although grown-up groundhogs can put up a ferocious fight, young 'chucks are easy prey for hawks, coyotes, and other hungry hunters.



SALAD DAYS

AUGUST 7 — *Nom, nom, nom.* To a hungry woodchuck, the whole world's a salad bowl. I might eat an insect on accident or an egg on occasion, but I try to stick to the four main food groups: grasses, grains, veggies, and fruits. I even climb trees — I am a squirrel after all — to feast on apples and pawpaws. With the pups off on their own, I can focus on feeding myself. I need to pack on pounds if I hope to survive winter.



USE 'EM OR LOSE 'EM

SEPTEMBER 19 — My front teeth, called incisors, are sharp enough to slice through shoots and leaves like a chef's knife through a celery stalk. Since I eat all the time, it's good that my chompers never quit growing. If they did, I'd grind them down to nubs in no time, like a pencil eraser that's been used too often. But — goodness forbid — if I stopped eating, my teeth might grow so long that I couldn't open wide enough to take another bite.



SUPER SNOOZER

OCTOBER 31 — Sleeping is my super power. Tonight, I waddled deep into my burrow, curled up in my leaf-lined bed, and switched my body on standby. In a few short hours, my heart will grind nearly to a halt, beating only five times a minute. I'll take a breath once every four minutes. And my temperature will plummet to just a few degrees above freezing. In this slowed-down state — called hibernation — I can sleep through the leanest months of winter. See you next spring. Zzzzzzzzzzzzz.



Nature's NIGHT Shift

When the sun goes down, these critters get up.

Some of Missouri's most recognizable animals often go unseen. That's because they're nocturnal, which means they're active at night. They search for food, court a mate, and raise their babies between dusk and dawn. During the daytime, they hide in dens or find a quiet place to rest.

Instructions

Can you find these 13 nocturnal animals lurking in the shadows of this wintry woods?



Gray Fox



Striped Skunk



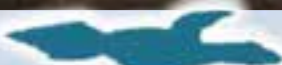
White-Footed Mouse



Flying Squirrel



**Screech
Owl**



Snow Goose



**Barred
Owl**



Coyote



**Great
Horned
Owl**



Opossum



**Short-Tailed
Shrew**



Bobcat



Raccoon

GET OUT!

FUN THINGS TO DO
AND GREAT PLACES
TO DISCOVER NATURE



Eastern fox squirrel

In February, high in the treetops, squirrels' leafy **NESTS BECOME NURSERIES**. Mama squirrels give birth to two or three blind, hairless, helpless babies. It takes about a month for the youngsters to open their eyes and grow hair, and another few weeks for them to venture outside.



In winter, you won't find many molehills. But that doesn't mean the **TINY TUNNELERS** aren't busy. About a foot below the surface, where the ground isn't frozen, eastern moles tunnel around, searching for insects to fill their furry bellies.



When you're tired of sled riding and winter hikes, put your time inside to good use by **TYING SOME TROUT FLIES**. Catch-and-keep season starts March 1 at Missouri's trout parks. Search the internet to learn how to tie woolly buggers and dozens of other flies.

CHICKADEES are itty-bitty but fearless. With patience, you can coax one to eat from your hand. Cup a handful of sunflower seeds in your open palm and sit patiently near a bird feeder. Hold really still! It may take multiple tries over several days, but soon the gutsy fluff balls will land on your hand to grab a quick snack.



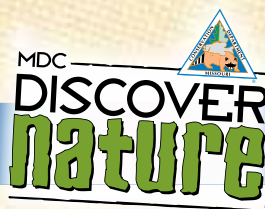
In mid-winter, **HORNED LARKS FLOCK** to harvested crop fields. The sparrow-like birds are the same size and color as dirt clods, so you'll need sharp eyes to spot one. The trick is to scan an open field and stop when you spot movement. Look closely, and you'll likely find a black-masked, yellow-throated bird that has "horns" of black feathers.



Black-capped chickadee



Looking for more ways to have fun outside? Find out about Discover Nature programs in your area at mdc.mo.gov/events.



WHAT IS IT?

— FROM PAGE 3 —



SYCAMORE SEED BALL

Sycamores are among the largest leafy trees in the United States, reaching heights over 100 feet and with trunks stretching 8 feet across. On older trees, the grayish-brown bark sloughs off to reveal bone-white bark underneath. In the fall, seed balls, each containing hundreds of seeds, dangle from the tree's branches. The balls break apart by spring, and the weightless, fuzzy seeds get carried away on the wind.

GO FIND IT!



Cut out this critter card and take it with you outside.
How many of the things on the card can you find?

RED FOX



© MENNO67 | DREAMSTIME.COM

RABBITS AND RODENTS

Red foxes are carnivores, which means they eat meat. Rabbits, mice, and voles make up most of their menu.

SUPERHERO HEARING

A fox's oversized ears can pinpoint a vole rustling under the snow from 100 feet away — about the length of a basketball court.

LETHAL LEAP

To pounce on an unsuspecting mouse, a red fox can leap the length of a living room.

BUSHY BLANKET

On cold nights, a fox curls into a doughnut and wraps its furry tail over its body like a blanket. To stay extra cozy, it tucks its nose underneath.

CANINE COMMUNICATION

In winter, female foxes give an ear-piercing squall to call to a mate. Males answer back with a few short barks.

ONE
LIE

— FROM PAGE 3 — Lie: 2 (Wood frogs live in cool, shady forests.)

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GO FIND IT!

Red foxes are found statewide near wooded edges and in open land beside forests. For more on this crafty canine, jump to mdc.mo.gov/field-guide.



RED FOX

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